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RUEHAK/AMEMBASSY ANKARA PRIORITY 3479  
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RUEHIT/AMCONSUL ISTANBUL PRIORITY 1733  
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STATE FOR SCA/CEN

E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: TURKMENISTAN: PRESIDENT REWARDS MOTHERS TO PROMOTE  
DEMOGRAPHIC GROWTH

11. (U) Sensitive but unclassified. Not for public Internet.

12. (SBU) SUMMARY: On March 3, President Berdimuhamedov established a new award giving women who have at least eight children about \$250 and some free services. While the award seems to be focused on helping to reverse Turkmenistan's declining population trend, many have suggested that it may be somewhat misfocused, since the women likely to have that many children live in rural areas where government services are sparse. It might be more effective to set the standard lower or offer stronger incentives such as a free apartment to families with five or more children. This kind of policy does nothing to improve Turkmenistan's international image.  
END SUMMARY.

TRIBUTE TO MOTHERHOOD

13. (U) On March 3, President Berdimuhamedov signed a decree to establish a motherhood award, "Ene mahri," for women who have given birth to eight or more children. The award provides a one-time cash award worth 2,500,000 manat (\$125 at the commercial exchange rate), free rides on public buses, free utilities, including heating, sewage and garbage collecting, and free dental care. The law applies to Turkmenistan nationals, women without citizenship and permanent residents. The award comes into effect when the eighth child reaches the age of 12 months, provided that all other children are alive. An exception is made for women whose children were killed in the line of duty or who died from job-related injuries or illnesses. The law also considers legally adopted children.

...OR DEMOGRAPHIC GROWTH AT A CHEAP PRICE

14. (U) The law is directed toward addressing a real problem, however. Increasing drug and alcohol abuse, poverty, and unemployment over the past 17 years have resulted in a decrease in the population growth rate. Today, few urban families can afford to have more than 3 children, while few rural families have more than 4 children.

15. (SBU) Local observers believe that families with five or more children -- the traditional Turkmen standard -- are very rare these days. An FSN's mother, a gynecologist for more than forty years,

has told us that over the last 15 years the birthrate has been gradually decreasing. While the government has not published any official statistics on this issue, UNICEF's demographic statistics on Turkmenistan indicate that while the country's annual population growth in 1970-1990 was 2.6 percent, it decreased to 1.8 percent in 1990-2005. According to the same statistics, Turkmenistan's birthrate from 2005 to 2007 declined from 27.08 to 25.38 per thousand.

16. (SBU) COMMENT: While there may be a need to focus on halting the decline in population growth, some believe the president's focus may be off-target. Traditionally, large families in Turkmenistan live in rural areas and have little or no access to most utilities and proper public transport. While the few women (if any) who are eligible for the award will appreciate the 2,500,000 manat cash award and free dental care, the other benefits proposed in the law will mean little to them. Many have suggested that if the president is sincerely interested in demographic growth, he could have set the standard lower or proposed stronger incentives -- offering mothers of five children a free apartment would be a far more enticing motivation to most women than a medal and a few million manat. One of downsides of all this is international websites already posting their arch "there they go again" stories. END COMMENT.